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The communicative needs of Bangladeshi economic migrants: The functional values of host country languages versus English as a lingua franca

**Philip Seargeant, Elizabeth J. Erling, Mike Solly
and Qumrul Hasan Chowdhury**

Abstract

This article investigates the language skills and the nature of language provision required by economic migrants from Bangladesh working in the Middle East. It focuses in particular on the perceived values of the host country language (Arabic) versus English as a lingua franca (ELF). While there have been a number of explorations of the value of learning the host country language for migrants in terms of both labour market outcomes and wellbeing, there is a paucity of, and pressing need for, studies investigating the value of ELF for economic migrants, particularly those from developing country contexts. This article presents the findings from an ethnographic study which explores the experiences, perceptions and specific language-related issues of a diverse cohort of returnee migrants from rural Bangladesh where, despite significant migration from the area, little is known about this population's language use and communicative needs. Our findings suggest that both the host country language (Arabic) and ELF have important functional values, but that these vary depending on interlocutors, domains of work and contexts of situation, as well as on the relative statuses (within an ecology of global linguistic value) of the two languages in different contexts. The analysis thus provides fresh and significant evidence regarding the role of language in economic migration and development for low-skilled migrants, both to and from contexts in which English has no official status. The article concludes by considering the implications for the types

of language education which might be most suitable for these and other economic migrants in comparable contexts.

Keywords

Economic migration, Bangladesh, Arabic, host country languages

1. Introduction

Recent statistics suggest that 244 million people, or 3.3 per cent of the world's population, were classified as migrants, that is people living outside their country of origin (UNFPA, 2016). The majority of migrants leave their home countries in search of better economic and social opportunities, with migration being seen as an important force in the development of low and middle income countries. This is certainly the case in Bangladesh, where over 9 million workers travelled abroad for work from 1976 to 2015 (BMET, 2016a), and 4.28% of its citizens were recorded as living outside the country in 2015 (IOM, 2016). The economy of Bangladesh has grown steadily in recent years, with the country moving from lower income to lower-middle income status in 2015. This can, in part, be attributed to remittances sent from migrant workers, which were estimated to make up around 11% of the country's GDP in 2013-14 (IOM, 2013), a figure which makes Bangladesh one of the world's top ten remittance-recipient countries (Paul & Das, 2010: 42).

The relative success of the migration experience depends, in part, on an individual's skills and the value of these skills in the host country's labour market. One of the skills that is often needed for migrants – and which, in certain contexts has been found to have a particular relationship with their income level (see below) – is language proficiency. In fact it has been argued that, with the increasing importance of the knowledge and service-based global economy, the possession of language and communication skills by migrant workers is

increasingly valued (Clark & Drinkwater, 2008; Rassool, 2013). A significant body of research has emerged exploring the relationship between host language competence and earnings for migrants in various national contexts (e.g. the UK, US, Canada, Australia, Germany and China). More recently, there have also been a small number of studies devoted to exploring the role and value of English as a lingua franca (ELF) among migrants to and from countries where English has no official status (e.g. Froese et al., 2012; Guido, 2008; 2012; Lan, 2003). To date, however, there has been little exploration of the role of ELF among low-skilled, temporary migrants. The purpose of this article is to explore the type and extent of communication needs perceived as being of value for Bangladeshi migrants in order to best navigate the various challenges of their experience working and living abroad. Drawing on data from an ethnographic study exploring the experiences and opinions of a diverse cohort of returnee migrants in rural Bangladesh, the research reported on in the article sheds light on the communicative contexts and domains where different linguistic skills are needed and the specific language and communication-related issues the respondents have encountered. The study thus provides new insight into how ELF is positioned and used as a language of economic development (Sargeant & Erling, 2011) among low-skilled workers, migrating temporarily for employment purposes, and the relative value it has as linguistic capital in different contexts (and as this is contrasted with the home language of the countries to which the workers have migrated). We conclude the article by considering the types of language education which might be most suitable for these as well as other economic migrants in comparable contexts.

2. Migration and the value of language skills

2.1 Values of host country languages

With migration being an important economic and social issue for most countries in the world today – whether developed or developing – there has been a range of

literature exploring the factors contributing to a migrant worker's potential for success in terms of contributing to the host and home economies, integrating into the host community and improving their individual wellbeing. A growing body of research explores the role of language in labour market outcomes for migrants, focusing primarily on the value of learning the host language of the country to which people are migrating. Studies of this sort have been undertaken in the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, Germany and China, and all of these generally assert that host language competence has a positive impact on the earnings of migrant workers (see, for example, Chiswick & Miller, 1995; 2003 for the US; Dustmann & Fabri, 2003 for the UK; Dustmann & van Soest, 2001 for Germany). The picture is not straight-forward however, and there are a range of other variables which are also found to have an impact on the relationship between earnings and host country language skills. These include:

- Education level. Higher levels of education correlate more positively with higher earnings and language proficiency (Dustmann & van Soest, 2001);
- Skill level. Language skills are more significant for the earnings of low-skilled migrants than for highly-skilled ones (Kossoudji, 1988);
- Ethnicity. In the US, for example, Hispanic low-skilled migrants have lower incomes than Asian low-skilled migrants with similar language abilities (Kossoudji 1988);
- Gender. The different types of labour that men and women are employed in has an impact on their needs for language and their earnings (Gao & Smyth, 2011; Thang et al., 2002);
- Age at arrival. Migrants arriving younger are more successful in terms of language learning and economic gain (Dustmann & van Soest, 2001); and
- Duration of stay. Temporary migrant workers have less success than permanent workers in terms of language learning and economic gain (Dustmann & Fabri 2003).

Apart from the direct impact on earnings, it has also been found that host country language proficiency enhances other aspects of socioeconomic mobility for migrant workers. Gao and Smyth (2011: 343), for example, argue that knowing the host country language makes a job search more 'efficient', helps workers progress rapidly in their jobs and has been found to reduce the possibility of discrimination from both employers and consumers. Wang and Tran (2012 in Ravasi et al., 2015: 1340) argue that knowing the host language creates scope for migrant workers to better integrate into their work environments, while Lauring and Selmer (2012) similarly argue that host language proficiency is useful in establishing a trustworthy relationships with fellow workers.

Knowledge of the host language has also been related to migrant workers' workplace safety (see Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009; Trajkovski & Loosemore, 2006). Examples of how this manifests itself include the fact that, as a result of poor communication skills on the part of workers in the host language, employers may take advantage of not adequately explaining risks involved with work, while workers themselves may fail to achieve sufficient understanding of these risks (Bender et al., 2006). With regards to Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East, Afsar (2009) reports on incidents of people being cheated out of their contract entitlements due to their lack of understanding Arabic, and of being beaten when not carrying out work properly as a result of misunderstanding directives. Buchenau (2008: 5) also argues that '[l]anguage barriers and a lack of understanding of the country's legal system can make it difficult for migrant workers to seek legal remedies against unfair labor practices.' As we shall see, a similar range of issues were experienced by the participants in our study, and often related specifically to the communicative resources they had available to them.

2.2 Values of ELF

While this growing body of research has explored the value for migrant workers of learning the host language, the comparative values of other languages, and

particularly English as a lingua franca, in similar situations, has received relatively little attention (Coleman, 2010: 10). Scholars commenting on the breadth of research into ELF have also argued that work in this field could benefit greatly from a political economy perspective, especially where it concerns developing countries (e.g. Ricento, 2015). There are, however, a few studies of note relevant to this area. These include Grenier and Nadeau (2011), who look at the economic returns of different languages at workplaces in Montreal, Quebec (where French is the primary official language). Their findings show that, for migrants, the use of ELF yields higher economic returns than French as a second language, and they thus conclude that English is a ‘necessity’ to attain success in the Canadian labour market whereas French is an ‘asset’ with insignificant effects (2011: 22). Other studies have focused more on the social or interpersonal value of ELF for migrant workers. For example, in the context of Singapore, Thang et al. (2002: 547) show that proficiency in English among Japanese women working in the country helped them attain ‘deeper levels of connection’ with the local people compared to their male counterparts. And in South Korea, Froese et al.’s research (2012: 339) revealed that while the use of Korean at work is useful for migrant workers in terms of cultural adjustments, the use of ELF can satisfy the need to ‘get ahead, get along, and find meaning’ (i.e. it has both a functional and status-related value).

In the context of Europe, Guido (2008; 2012) has explored ELF exchanges between Western officials (e.g. immigration officials) and non-Western migrants, finding that unequal power relations in these encounters contributes to communicative difficulties, thus pointing to the limited value of ELF for non-Western migrants in such contexts. Another study which indicates the relative value of ELF and its relationship to other socioeconomic factors is that conducted by Lan (2003), which shows that the use of ELF boosts the cultural capital of female Filipina migrant workers in the Taiwanese labour market. Despite the generally low status of domestic service workers, Filipina domestic workers who are proficient in English appear to have a socioeconomic advantage compared to those from countries such as Indonesia who have less English proficiency. The

Filipina migrants, who tend to have better English proficiency than their newly middle-class Taiwanese employers, are well positioned in the labour market due to the fact that English is valued by their employers for their children's education.

In the context of the Middle East, where there are over ten million migrant workers making up a large percentage of the overall population, research into values of language and communicative needs of migrants is only in its infancy. Manseau (2006) has found that learning the host country language (Arabic) is a difficulty reported by many migrant workers. He also found that remuneration differs greatly according to the nationality of the migrant. For example, most Filipina domestic workers receive higher remuneration than Sri Lankan and Ethiopian nationals, and, as Lan (2003) suggests above, this may be related to their skills in English.

While there has been research into perceived values of English among Bangladeshis (Erling et al., 2014; Seargeant et al., 2016), and investigations of its economic value in the domestic labour market (Erling & Power, 2014), the role and perceived value of English among temporary migrant workers from Bangladesh has received little attention up to now. Previous research has shown that one of the primary reasons given by rural Bangladeshis for wanting to learn English in general is that it can assist in pursuing economic migration, and will thus help with providing a better life for both the individual and their family back home (Erling et al., 2012). It has also been shown that lack of language ability among Bangladeshi migrant workers serves as an obstacle which impacts negatively on their migration experience (IOM, 2002: 64), and that Bangladeshis place low on the scale of English proficiency compared to migrant workers from the Philippines or Malaysia, and thus often face various forms of discrimination (Rubdy & McKay, 2013). This current study was thus designed specifically to provide further insight into the extent to which English and other languages are perceived as being useful among returnee migrants who had worked in the Middle East and since returned to Bangladesh, and why particular languages have specific functional values in different contexts.

3. Context and methodology

3.1 Bangladesh and migration

Before moving to an explanation of the research and its findings, it will be useful to offer a brief sketch of the context in which it took place. Bangladesh shifted from being classified as a lower income country to a lower-middle income one in 2015. Despite this, poverty remains a severe problem in the country, with over 30% of the population classified as living below the poverty line. Due to the economic and social challenges in Bangladesh, economic migration has become a notable social phenomenon. As noted above, government statistics record that over 9 million workers travelled abroad for work in the period 1976 to 2015 (BMET, 2016a), and, given that many people travel through unofficial channels, this figure is likely to be much higher. During this timeframe economic migration has become an important aspect of the Bangladeshi economy and one on which the survival of many households in the country rely (Ahmed, 2011).

The focus of this study is temporary migrants travelling to the Middle East, which operates as the destination of approximately 75% of all Bangladeshi migrants (Rahman, 2012). This group is usually involved in short-term employment for specific job contracts, with earnings mostly being lower than those of host country nationals or permanent migrants. Despite this, temporary migrants send significant percentages of their income back to their families (Ahmed, 2011). The research focused on a rural community from Kharrah Village in the Munshiganj district of Bangladesh. The village is about thirty miles south of the capital Dhaka, and has a long history of migration, with the majority of households having family members who are now or have previously worked in the Middle East.

3.2 Methodology

The study used an ethnographically-based methodology, surveying a cross-section of members of the community in Kharrah Village who had experienced economic migration to the Middle East. The data collection incorporated three different stages, consisting of the pilot study, the main visit, and a follow-up visit. The pilot was conducted in late 2013 with the intention of testing the data-collection method and in order to allow one of the UK-based researchers to visit the research site. The main data collection took place at the end of 2013. The following summer (June 2014) a follow-up visit took place in order to enquire further into threads which initial questioning had not covered, and to recruit two further female participants.

During the field visits, the two field researchers had the assistance of a community member who helped to establish meetings with other participants. They also recorded their insights on the geographic, socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic specifics of the local communities. Participants in the study were interviewed either in groups or individually, depending on their availability and on the relationship and rapport they had with others in the same community. Central to the interview process was the eliciting of participants' autobiographical narratives and their reflections on their personal migration histories and the specific role of language and language-related issues in this (Pavlenko, 2007, 2008; Piller & Takahashi, 2010).

The interview schedule was designed to be flexible enough to accommodate scenarios in which participants wished to introduce new topics or elaborate in detail on certain issues. It covered general questions about participants' education and linguistic history; questions relating to their decision to migrate, the challenges they faced at various stages of the process, their experiences while working overseas; as well as questions about their reflections on the experience since returning to Bangladesh, and whether and in what way they felt it to have been beneficial either financially or otherwise. The topic of languages was a specific focus throughout. However, participants were not told that the researchers were particularly interested in the perceptions of and uses of English so as to

avoid this unduly skewing the answers. Interviews were conducted in Bangla and audio-recorded, with the data then being transcribed and translated by the Bangladeshi researchers. The translations have been left unaltered, thus reflecting local sociolects of English.

3.3 Ethics and access

This research was undertaken within a structured framework which includes assessment by the Open University Human Participants and Material Ethics Committee. We also followed the British Association for Applied Linguistics Recommendations for Good Practice in Applied Linguistics, while being aware of the particular challenges of researching ethically in development contexts (see Hultgren et al., 2016). For example, because the participants' education and literacy rates were generally very low, oral interviews were the primary means of data gathering, and all statements of informed consent were explained orally. Where applicable participants also signed a written consent form. All research participants in this study, including local guides, have been anonymised, and pseudonyms are used to refer to them.

Gaining access to these participants was a major challenge of the study. The two person Bangladeshi research team (one of whom is a co-author of this article), although familiar with migration issues in the country, had no personal relationships with the community beyond one family contact. This initial contact proved instrumental in providing a further contact who served as a liaison for the community. Through him, the process of contacting participants was achieved by means of a 'snowball sample', whereby existing participants recruited future participants from among their acquaintances, and thus used the local networks as a means of building up a broad group of participants.

3.4 Analysis of data

The analysis proceeded according to a multi-step process. In the initial stage we constructed biographical profiles of the participants to provide a context for their accounts of their experience and the opinions they voiced. We then conducted a close reading of the participants' narratives, in which they relayed their experience of migration and their perceived needs and attitudes to issues around language provision, use and functional value. These narratives are treated as 'accounts' of truths rather than as factual reports of the situation (cf. Talmy, 2010).

This close reading led to the identification of four recurring themes: language learning and use (including the range of languages employed); education and skills; intercultural communication; and economic benefits and status. Using these themes as structuring categories, the accounts were then reanalysed by means of a qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2006), which gave insights into broader ideological patterns relating to the positioning of different languages within the migration experience.

5. Findings

The findings will be reported in two stages. The first stage provides a profile of the participants using descriptive statistics from the data set, while the second focuses on the themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' narratives, looking at their perceptions around the need for and uses of the host country language (Arabic) and English as a lingua franca (ELF).

5.1 Profile of participants

In providing an overall profile of the participants in this project, we draw comparisons with general statistics about migrants from Bangladesh in order to give a sense of the extent to which our sample may be considered in some way typical. Reflecting the general pattern in the nation as a whole, the majority of

participants in this study (63%) worked in Saudi Arabia. Other destinations included the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (7 participants), Kuwait (4), Oman (2), Bahrain (1), Lebanon (1), Qatar (1), Iraq (1) and Libya (1), as well as Singapore (5), South Korea (2), Malaysia (1). Ten of the participants worked in two or more countries, with one having worked in a total of seven countries. As the participants spent anywhere between 2.5 years to 24 years working abroad, with the median being 10.8 years, the use of the term ‘temporary migrant’ is variable. The age of participants ranged from 25 to 62, with the median age (44) being above that reported in previous research (32) (Sharma & Zaman, 2009); our slightly older cohort likely due to the focus on return migrants.

Like the majority of migrants from Bangladesh to the Middle East (98 per cent), the majority of participants in our study were male (23 of 27, or 85 per cent). We made concerted efforts to include women in the sample, as the number of migrant women is rising (BMET, 2016b) due to the lifting of a ban on unskilled or semi-skilled women under the age of 35 migrating, which was implemented because of fears about the abuse they can face (Siddiqui, 2001; 2005). The general pattern for female migrant workers is that they are or have been married; many are divorced or widowed, and this acts as a factor in their decision to seek work abroad to help support their families (Asfar, 2009: 7). Two of the women in our study reported being left by their husbands without any form of financial support, and thus having no real alternative in terms of supporting their children but to pursue work abroad.

The participants were involved in a range of occupations during their time abroad, and Table 1 provides a list of the eight most common of these. Several of the participants changed occupation during their time abroad (thus the number of occupations is greater than the number of participants). Only six of the 27 worked in one job continually during their period abroad, while eight worked in two, ten worked in three, and three worked in four or more. This gives a sense of the occupational insecurity that most of migrants face, as well as the flexibility required in terms of skills.

Occupation while working abroad	(n=33)
Domestic worker	7
Shopkeeper	5
Catering	4
Mechanic	4
Security	4
Driver	3
Construction	3
Pipeline worker	3

Table 1: Occupations of participants while working abroad

The educational profile of the participants in our study was similar to the general statistics: four had no formal education; four only finished primary school education; 15 (or just over half) completed secondary education; and four had been educated to undergraduate level. In general, the women had lower levels of education than the men, with two of the four women reporting no formal education at all. Literacy skills were very weak amongst those with no formal education, with one or two of the participants noting that they were able to write little more than their names. The lack of formal education was a contributing factor for some in their decision to seek work abroad. For others, low scores on exams prevented them from continuing with their education. Domestic issues were another reason for migrating: some mentioned family tragedies, such as the death of a father or being left by their husband, and the resulting financial hardship. For the majority of the women, the lack of (acceptable) opportunities for low-skilled employment for women in Bangladesh, combined with their own low levels of education, contributed to the decision to migrate.

The participants reported a diverse range of language skills before they migrated (see Table 2). Fifteen had some experience of English education prior to

migration, though only ten had learned English at school (where it has featured in the national curriculum from Grade 1 since 1990 [see Hamid & Erling, 2015]). Nine reported having some Arabic, which may be a result of the fact that many Bangladeshis study the language as part of their religious education. A third said they had no foreign language knowledge at all before departure. All the participants reported having communicative ability in at least one additional language (and often more) after the migration experience.

Foreign language knowledge	(n=27)
English	15 (56%)
Arabic	9 (33%)
Korean	1 (3%)
None	9 (33%)

Table 2: Foreign language knowledge prior to migration

5.2 Values of language

As noted above, previous research has indicated that in rural Bangladeshi communities there seems to be a strong general desire to learn English, and that one of the primary reasons given for why the language is seen as important is its perceived usefulness for those seeking work abroad (Erling et al., 2012). This generally very positive attitude towards English persisted in the participants in the current study, as illustrated in the following exchange with Badol, who worked in construction:

Badol: English is a must. You have to know English... If you know English, you need not know any other languages...

Interviewer: Really? OK, for example, someone knows good English, but does not know the language of the country where he lives. Will he survive?

Badol: He will survive and in fact, will do very well. He will get very good job. The company will notice that he knows English.

Yet while this may have been a basic, widespread ideology, further questioning of the participants about the details of their experience of migration, of the communication challenges they faced, and the way in which linguistic resources were needed, reveals a more complex pattern, where English operating as a *lingua franca* is indeed of value but only in certain contexts and domains, and that the host language (Arabic) likewise has important functional value, but in a rather different set of contexts. In examining the patterns that emerged from the data we highlight the ways that different linguistic capabilities are called for in different scenarios, how this relates to the ways ELF is positioned according to domain and context, and to the ways that the unequal distribution of linguistic resources plays a key part in the everyday lives – and especially the challenges – experienced by our participants.

5.2.1 The value of English

For the majority of our participants (22, or 81%) English was cited as an important language for migrant workers. One of the most commonly reported reasons for this was the role it has as a global language for the naming and labelling of goods, so that those who worked in companies which dealt with, for example, car parts or air-conditioning units, needed a certain level of English language literacy skills in order to carry out their everyday work tasks. Within this context, a number talked about how their knowledge of English gave them an edge over others and could help them make a good impression with host country employers. For example Liton, who worked in a shop, describes how his English skills differentiated him from his boss whose English proficiency level was lower than his:

Soon after starting to work in Saudi Arabia, I used to work in the store of Army. In that store, they used to keep all the automobile parts... My boss used to tell me the name of the parts which I wrote down. He once told me 'Sober Kistara'. I asked him, 'What is 'Sober Kistara'?' I told him to show me the parts. Then I saw the parts and saw that it is rather 'Super Extra'. ...

Another reason for English related to global commerce was the fact that for a number of participants the businesses they worked in were run or owned by English speakers from the US or Europe or by other non-nationals (e.g. from India, Iran, Sudan) who generally communicated with employees in English. Kalam, for example, notes that for his job in an international hospital in Saudi Arabia, English operated as the main language of communication:

I worked in a hospital which was run by people from Europe and the USA. So, I had to speak in English. There were very few Arab staffs in that hospital. I mostly spoke in English. Use of Arabic was very limited... The Europeans spoke in English and also in some Arabic with us. We too similarly spoke in English and some Arabic with them... English was important in my job. For communicating with the Arabs, I used Arabic. But there were more international patients in that hospital than the Saudis. So, I had to speak in English only with them.

Examples such as the above point to the role that English occupies on a truly global level – as the lingua franca of industries which operate global businesses in areas such as agriculture and electronics – as well as professional communities such as medicine. This is very much in keeping with studies which report on the status of English as an international language of business and medicine (e.g. Michaud, 2012), and even for those workers at the periphery of these domains (e.g. working in retail outlets), English is a useful resource.

English also had value as a lingua franca with other migrant workers. There was stress put upon the usefulness of English with other temporary migrant workers from different language backgrounds. Badol explains that English was the only option to communicate with many of them:

... It's better to use English with the foreigners. ...you have to speak in English with the Filipinos. They don't know any other language. They don't want to learn any other language.

Participants in the study who spoke English and Arabic noted that they were sometimes called on to serve as a mediator for those who didn't, and that this skill was valued both by employers and fellow employees. This was exemplified by Gofor, a gardener who had worked in Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for 18 years:

In my company, there were a few persons who could neither speak Arabic nor English. When they got sick, it was very difficult for the doctors to communicate with them. I was assigned with the responsibility to communicate with the doctors in Arabic and in English on their behalf. I could do that very successfully. The company officials were very happy with me.

Another context in which English was noted as being potentially useful was at the beginning of the migration experience, before the participants had had an opportunity to learn Arabic. This is made clear in the recollection of Kalam, who went on to work in a hospital and a restaurant, but needed the intervention of an English-speaking higher official when he first went to Saudi Arabia:

The day when I went to the foreign country for the first time, I had a problem. Actually, the photo in my passport was taken from another photo. That's why the picture was very blurred. When they saw this passport in the Airport in Saudi Arabia ... they stopped me ... I was trying to explain him my situation, but since he did not

understand any English, he did not understand anything. Then the Captain came. I explained things to the Captain in English. The Captain understood everything and he asked me to leave. That's what happened.

In Kalam's case, English is useful as a substitute for the host language, although the suggestion is that were he to have been able to speak Arabic, this would have been more immediately helpful for the situation he found himself in. In this instance, English operates as a *lingua franca* where neither party speaks each other's language, but as the encounter is between a local and migrant it is suggested that Arabic, were the migrant to have spoken it, would have been more useful.

A similar scenario where knowledge of English as a substitute for Arabic helped in resolving a potentially serious and distressing situation is recounted by Sobhan, who tells a story about an Arabic-speaking co-worker who accused him of theft:

One day he [the co-worker] lost some money and he complained to the local police that the Bangladeshis stole his money. ... Police came and arrested me and other Bangladeshis on accusation of stealing. The Sudanese persons came and he, other Bangladeshis and the police were speaking in Arabic. However, gradually Police released all other Bangladeshis one after another except me. That is the most terrible experience of my life. This can happen in a foreign country when you don't know the language. They were asking me questions in Arabic, but I did not understand anything. It had been only two days that I went to that country. They were saying that I stole 140 dinar. ... Then another senior Police officer came. He appeared to know some English. He asked me '150 dinar, you thief?', I replied 'no sir, never, i am taking money never, never did.' I also said I didn't know anything about the money. I said

very clearly ‘don’t know this money, this currency from Kuwait.’

By this time, other Police officers came. The police officer was very convinced. ... Finally, they released me from the accusation of theft. ... That was a very memorable experience in my life. I could rescue myself because of knowing English.

While not all of the stories are this serious in nature, the majority of participants made it clear that English had an important place in their lives as migrants, but the form of English (spoken or written) varied in importance depending on the particular situation. Knowledge of written English could provide advantages in work contexts (especially in terms of reading information on products from global suppliers), but spoken English was particularly useful in social and working contexts with other migrants, and the degree of usefulness was often dependent on the context and the national origin of the other migrants. English was particularly useful if the participant had limited abilities in Arabic, which was often the case at the outset of the migratory experience. We could suggest, therefore, that English operates as a default lingua franca – as a way of getting by in the absence of knowledge of the host language – when interacting with locals. Its value is more pronounced when dealing with products or environments which are part of the global flow services and goods, especially those related to big international business. And finally it also works as a lingua franca with other migrants, where the encounters are more likely to be relatively equal, and thus there is no expectation on the Bangladeshi migrants to speak another language.

5.2.2 The value of the host country language (Arabic)

A similar majority of participants (21 people, or 78%) felt that Arabic, as host country national language, was an equally important skill for them to learn, with its value being as a means of everyday communication with local colleagues, customers and employers. So, for example, Sobhan, who worked as a grocer in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for 11 years, explains that knowledge of the host country language was essential for the fundamental execution of his job.

In my first overseas job as a grocer, I had to know Arabic. Since my job was to sell different items, it was very important for me to know the names of different items and to count in Arabic.

Knowledge of the language was also seen as an advantage in terms of managing the circumstances of one's employment, and this was often framed in terms not of what benefits the language would provide, but of how it could be used to avoid certain difficult situations. For example, it was spoken of as a necessary resource for appeasing employers, as in this quote from Liton:

if you don't know [Arabic], then how will you work? The language is very easy. You can learn that quickly. If you do not learn that quickly, then it will happen that they asked you to bring one thing, but you brought another thing. Then they will get angry

Faheem, a pesticide worker who lived for 24 years in Libya, voices a similar opinion, which appears as a general precept about attitudes to (lack of) knowledge of the host country language:

They get very angry if you don't know Arabic. They say, 'why you have come to Arab if you don't know Arabic?'

And Shawkat, who worked in Saudi Arabia for eight years as an electrical worker, relates how knowledge of Arabic not only helped him avoid a potential problem with severe financial consequences, but ultimately turn it to his advantage by being able to communicate the rationale behind his actions:

I was supposed to switch off 60-70 electronic signboards of my company. One night, I forgot to do that. Then the supervisor was very angry with me. He told me that my salary of one month will be deducted. Even though I forgot to switch off, I told him that

‘look, very intentionally I did not switch off the lights of the signboards. Everyone will be able to see the signboards of your company for the whole night. That will work for your company very well’. He was very happy with my idea. He gave me 100 riel tips. This can happen when you know the language.

The stress on the way that knowledge of the host language can help protect against difficulties and hardships indicates something of the unequal power situations of the two parties, and the way that language issues can become a part of this. Consistent with Afsar (2009) and Buchenau (2008), who found that migrant workers without knowledge of Arabic were more susceptible to being cheated or beaten, a repeated refrain regarding knowledge of the host country language was the role it played in helping avoid difficulties, which in some cases seemed to arise from discrimination. Liton, for example, explained how being able to explain one’s circumstances allows one to establish a rapport with one’s interlocutor, thus leading to better general treatment:

If police asks you something, and you can reply that in good Arabic, then there will be no problem. But if you fail to answer that as you don’t know Arabic very well, then you will be in trouble. ... Even if you are illegal, but if you can explain your situation well, they would say, ‘It’s not my duty to arrest you. This is the job of the immigration police. This is not my job’. If you can’t explain your situation well, it’s found that they would send you back to your home country. But if you can explain your situation that you have got parents at home who are dependent on your income, then it has been found that they might release you. Actually, they are also human being.

This issue of the potential consequences of discrimination, and how these are related to the ability to converse with employers, was particularly prevalent in the female participants’ narratives. All four women, who

worked as domestic help within families, reported having learned Arabic after arrival in the Middle East, and how before they spoke the language their jobs as domestic workers were particularly distressing. For example, Bilkis, who had worked with one family in Saudi Arabia for 16 years, talks of how, at the beginning:

even the children would beat you. ... What happens is that after coming back from school, they throw bags to you. They would ask for so many things. If you don't understand what they say, they would get angry and throw at you whatever they have with them.

Likewise Afia, a domestic worker who has worked in six Middle Eastern countries for more than twenty years, spoke of how her female employers used physical violence if she failed to understand something:

At the beginning I had lots of problem with language. If they asked for glass, I used to give plate. If they asked for spoons, I gave plates. In the case of such mistakes, they knocked me in my hand. They knocked me in my head with the thing that they asked for. That's how I remembered the names of things.

As well as indicating the urgent need for a knowledge of the host country language, these examples demonstrate a strong need for further awareness of employment rights. Also interesting to note is that the four women in this study felt that English was not, in general, useful to them. This was perhaps due to the fact that they worked in Arabic-speaking families and had restricted contact with the community beyond this household, with only limited opportunities to communicate with other (often Bangladeshi-speaking) domestic workers. It also points to the very unequal power dynamics involved in their relationship with their employers, and the way that this is replicated in communication issues, where one party is speaking their L1, the other expected to speak an (often relatively unfamiliar) L2.

In summary then, the picture is of English as a qualified lingua franca, of use in particular contexts, especially those related to global business, but with less traction in everyday communicative situations where the host language is expected by the locals, and the migrants, having less status, are obliged to comply. English is useful for functional purposes in being able to decode the names and instructions of goods and equipment. It is also useful for communicating with other migrants, both those from English-speaking contexts (often employed in contexts where English is a recognised international standard) and those from contexts where English is more regularly used (e.g. India, Philippines). English can also help settle disputes or problems on occasions, especially for those lacking skills in the host country language, but only in situations where the participant did not have Arabic skills. The host country language, on the other hand, is important for the everyday aspects of work. It helps with daily communication, with administrative issues – both of which are likely to be taking place between the migrant and a local – and with navigating difficult circumstances and discrimination. As such, a pattern relating to the global flow of goods, capital and information does still promote English as an appropriate and sometimes necessary resource in certain situations, but in terms of everyday subsistence with the local population (who are for the most part in positions of power over the migrants) there is a necessity (and expectation) that Arabic be learnt and used.

6. Implications: Language training provision for migrant workers in Bangladesh

In the concluding section of this article we explore current provisions for language training both at governmental and non-governmental initiatives in Bangladesh, and then consider what the most appropriate type of provision for migrant workers might look like based on the findings in this research.

Recognising the need for further skills-development for migrant workers, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), established in 1976, is

responsible for building up the human resources of Bangladeshi migrants. As such, BMET provides three one-hour Pre-Departure Orientation Training (PDOT) sessions to would-be migrant workers which cover issues such as service conditions, working environment, culture, salary, benefits, the remittance system and the language of the host country (BMET, 2009). The language needs of Bangladeshi migrant workers are also addressed by non-governmental organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), which has developed language materials in Arabic, English and Bangla and aims to produce modules for four trades, i.e. housekeeping, care-giving, construction and electrical work (ILO, 2014). Despite such attempts, the quality, reach and durational adequacy of such training has been questioned: while BMET data indicate that 107,626 workers went abroad to work in the first quarter of 2013, only 3,703 workers attended the PDOT in the same time (Islam, 2013). It is perhaps also significant that none of the participants in our study mentioned taking part in any such training.

Given the difficulty of providing and accessing such training for migrant workers, particularly for a period of time which would be meaningful, it is worth considering whether open resources delivered through mobile technologies might be more appropriate to fill the needs of migrant workers, particularly since there will be an on-going need. As mobile phone ownership is ubiquitous among Bangladeshi migrant workers (BDNews24, 2015), and thus one way to provide guidance and relevant language learning in both the host language and English may be through video available as both online resources and offline through SD cards on mobile phones.

With regard to the types of communicative skills that would be featured in such resources, the current study suggests that it should be directed to the very particular concerns of migrant labourers who need different domain- and function-specific registers of Arabic, English and other languages in their domestic, working and official lives. For example, in their working situations, regardless of the host language, a knowledge of English for the reading of basic

instructions and labels in globally manufactured goods would be valuable; but the same employee may need to understand imperatives and be able to effectively respond to the language of instruction, in Arabic. In general, migrant workers, especially those who have had limited education and skills development, need language provision that enhances skills in literacy and numeracy, potentially in a range of languages. There is also a need for teaching both Arabic and English for intercultural communication and general functional communication with other migrant workers in both professional and domestic contexts.

Crucially it seems that there is also a need for learning English to communicate with officialdom and to have the English knowledge to explain context and situations to people in positions of authority. The acquisition of the necessary linguistic tools in this, and other situations encountered above would help to address the power imbalances that some of the interviewees described. In direct contact situations with the host community (in the Middle East), Arabic is likely to be the key tool needed, but English is a close second in many situations. However, power imbalances in social situations with migrant workers from a range of linguistic backgrounds are more likely to be alleviated by acquisition of appropriate English, and Arabic may be of little use here. The study also confirmed a need for some knowledge of all four skills of English (speaking, listening, reading and writing), the extent of which depends on the particular situation of an individual as exemplified above.

A certain proficiency in English, then, can provide some of the linguistic needs for many of the migrant workers in our study. But in most cases ELF (in the terms outlined above) is not enough by itself; some targeted knowledge of other languages, especially Arabic, is also necessary to interact effectively in migration contexts. Guido (2012), in discussing the issue of the imbalance of power in relation to migration and ELF and host languages, suggests that while knowing either or both languages can facilitate the migration experience and make aspects of it more manageable, both languages are still of limited value in certain respects due to unequal power relations within the wider social context, an issue we have

outlined above with regards which language is greater use in a range of different contexts, the majority of which include a marked difference in status between the interlocutors. A knowledge of an appropriate lingua franca may help adjust the imbalance of power to some degree, but this study indicates that there is no single lingua franca that can meet all needs of migrant workers. However, an appropriate combination of specific knowledge of English and Arabic (in the case of this study), can help to bridge the linguistic power gap.

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